

Blog posts

The EU family

A BRUSSELS DIARY: PART 3

Ahead of the European elections on 22 May, Betto van Waarden describes the daily routine of decision-making in Brussels.

Exclusive 14 May, by Betto van Waarden

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The British diplomat wasn't being diplomatic: "You just have to give your colleagues a nice 'shit sandwich,'" he told me. "You begin and end your comments with lots of praise for the work of the presiding member state and Commission, and you put all your criticism in between."

When I first went to a meeting at the Council of the EU as a representative of the European Commission, I assumed matters would proceed in a diplomatically positive way. Member states were even more positive about our Commission proposal than I expected, and so I almost wrote in my meeting report that everyone seemed to agree with us. After several meetings, I realised that a Council meeting with lower-ranking civil servants of all the EU states is like a caricature of a family day out: different characters with diverse interests come together and try to make the best of it. They are excessively friendly and positive because they don't know when they might need each other in the future.

Grandma Council President (during my time in Brussels, Cyprus, Ireland, Lithuania and Greece) usually opens the family day with her view of the legislative proposal of Grandpa Commission. Then the grandchildren are allowed to speak. They often find Grandpa's plans too ambitious, even unfeasible, and spend the rest of the day trying to weaken his proposal with nuances, such as "where appropriate" and "taking into account national legislation". Grandchild Netherlands and the other northern grandchildren are pointed, if blunt: "Thank you madam chair. The Netherlands would like to make three points. Point one is... point two is... and point three is... Thank you for your attention."

Their southern cousins like to tell the family beautiful long stories. They each talk for more than ten minutes about how great it is that the whole family has gathered here today, how important the issue is for European society, etcetera. Sometimes they don't have a point or it got lost in their long story, but it doesn't matter: the southerners live by the rule that every respected family member takes the floor, regardless of whether he wants to change anything in Grandpa's proposal. Grandpa Commission once whispered in my ear that if I wanted coffee, I should wait until Cousin Italy started talking—when he did, four other cousins immediately left for coffee or a smoke. As colleagues say: "The longer you stay in Brussels, the more you realise that many stereotypes have a lot of truth in them."

In general, the grandchildren willingly go along with the proposals, and Grandma Council President once joked that the younger grandchildren, especially the East Europeans, barely seemed to realise that they could vote against Grandpa's proposal. She feared, though, that they could suddenly follow the example of their older cousins Netherlands and Sweden, who indicated in the working party for sport that they would vote against the Health Enhancing Physical Activity policy proposal. Only Father Germany and Mother France—and the always grumpy but well-mannered Uncle United Kingdom—really dare to oppose Grandpa and Grandma.

During the breaks, the grandchildren all try to charm Grandpa Commission and Grandma Council President to make sure they become the favourite grandchild and get a big Christmas present. An Irish Council chair admitted to me after Ireland's presidency that Sweden often got what it wanted during negotiations because the Swedish attaché was such a nice guy. Other countries had comparatively few wishes granted because their attachés didn't have the social skills. Grandpa Commission uses these opportunities to twist the grandchildren round his finger. "You just have to talk one-on-one with these attachés for a moment to give them the feeling that they matter," a Commission colleague said. Stern Mother France often requires "massaging".

Not all the grandchildren have time for lunch because they have to take care of a little brother or sister. An attaché told me that during lunch she has to "babysit" her national civil servants who flew over for the meeting. Fortunately there's sometimes a chance to relax at the end of the day, and Grandma Council President will offer a traditional drink from her country at her permanent representation in Brussels. The strong Lithuanian liquor was so popular last year that the next day there was an empty space the size of Latvia, Italy and Greece at the meeting table. Usually there is also a family outing to Grandma's country. But "what happens outside Brussels, stays outside Brussels," although we may assume that the education working party is known as the "party working party" for a good reason.

The European family is a mixed bunch of self-willed countries with diverging interests and customs, not always capable of acting in the most “efficient” and goal-oriented way. But perhaps the important thing is that the family does come together from time to time to strengthen family ties and keep the peace.

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